

House Members Send Obama Benchmarks for Colombia FTA

Thursday, March 17 2011

Stress that they must be reached before considering the pact

WASHINGTON, DC – Today, Representative Mike Michaud (ME-02), Chairman of the House Trade Working Group, joined with Representatives George Miller, Jim McGovern, Rosa DeLauro, Jan Schakowsky and Linda Sánchez in sending President Obama a letter and memo detailing benchmarks that the lawmakers see as necessary to meet before the United States considers ratifying a free trade agreement with Colombia.

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“The President campaigned on taking our trade policy in a new direction, but since taking office he has gone in the wrong direction,” said Michaud. “Sending up the trade agreement with Colombia, when that country is the world’s most dangerous country for trade unionists, would signal to the world that this Administration is not serious about human rights or committed to even the most basic worker protections. The U.S. must hold our allies to the highest standard of human rights, and our nation’s trade policies must reflect that principle.”

The full text of the letter that was sent to President Obama today can be found below, and the memo detailing the benchmarks can be found [here](#).

March 17, 2011

The Honorable Barack Obama

President of the United States

The White House

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama,

We write to you with significant urgency about the consideration of the pending U.S. – Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and to offer a credible and meaningful basis for assessing whether conditions on the ground in Colombia have been sufficiently transformed to merit consideration of this FTA by Congress.

At a time of economic uncertainty, with millions of families across our country struggling to support themselves, it is our responsibility as Members of Congress to do everything in our power to promote and protect American jobs. One of the most important ways we can safeguard the ability of American families to make a living and keep their jobs is by guaranteeing they are not in competition with workers in other countries whose wages are kept low not simply because

their countries are poor, but because they lack the essential democratic rights that American workers have to improve their standards of living — the right to speak out, to protest, to organize unions, to bargain collectively and directly with their employers, and to freely support political efforts to improve their economic condition. Colombia, sadly, stands out as a country where wages are kept low and workers are repressed through widespread violence against employees trying to better their lot.

Mr. President, we have long been engaged on human rights issues in Colombia, many of us for over a decade; these are matters of critical concern in their own right, which demand your attention and the attention of Congress. Our monitoring of the labor and human rights situation on the ground in Colombia indicates that very little tangible progress has been made in improving human rights. Colombia continues to lead the world in murders of trade unionists. The level of murder and violence is not declining. Despite this, we believe this is a moment of opportunity for the United States and Colombia to break the stalemate and address the underlying problems that have made consideration of this FTA untenable for many Members of Congress and a broad swath of the American public.

The United States and Colombia currently enjoy a robust trade relationship, and we believe that should be continued by providing a two-year extension of the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA). In that same spirit, and consistent with your commitment to ensure that trade agreements reflect our values as a nation, we provide for your serious consideration the attached memo outlining measures that can be undertaken immediately and in the near term by the Colombian government. If implemented with strong and sincere political will, these measures could result in Colombia showing substantial progress in areas that have long been under scrutiny by those concerned about labor and human rights conditions in Colombia.

These are credible, achievable steps Colombia can take in the near term to comply with internationally recognized labor rights; protect unionists and other rights activists from violence, attacks and threats; and break with its long history of impunity. Anyone familiar with Colombia understands that the magnitude and roots of the challenges it faces cannot be addressed in one or two years, but the measures we describe would clearly show that Colombia has turned the corner and is committed to irrevocable and sustainable change.

We support international trade and we are dedicated to doing everything possible to increase American jobs — but only if the terms are fair to American workers. Therefore, before you send us an FTA with Colombia for consideration, we ask that you first assure us that Colombia's long track record of repression, violence and murder of labor unionists has truly changed and that trade between our countries can take place on an even playing field for both nations' workers. As you have commented, "The history in Colombia right now is that labor leaders have been targeted for assassination on a fairly consistent basis and there have not been prosecutions... We have to stand for human rights and we have to make sure that violence isn't being perpetrated against workers who are just trying to organize for their rights."

The question remains of how to evaluate and determine whether the situation on the ground in Colombia has improved substantially with regards to basic labor rights for Colombia's workers, and by dramatically diminishing the level of violence carried out with impunity against unionists and rights defenders.

We believe that in order to make such a determination it is essential to ask those most affected by the lack of rights and the threat of violence. As Members of Congress, we will consult and speak directly with Colombian trade unionists, rights defenders, Afro-Colombian and indigenous leaders, and rely upon the analysis of Colombian organizations such as the Escuela Nacional Sindical and others, to determine the situation on the ground and whether substantial, sustainable and irreversible change is genuinely occurring. We recommend that responsible officials in your Administration interfacing with Colombia use the good offices of the Bureau of International Labor Affairs in the U.S. Department of Labor to do the same.

Please feel free to contact us should you have any questions about these recommendations. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss them with you.

Sincerely,

James P. McGovern

George Miller

Rosa L. DeLauro

Michael H. Michaud

Janice D. Schakowsky

Linda T. Sánchez

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